

Letter to the Community # 5

4/21/2020

Dear Thurston County Community,

I know it has been very difficult and challenging for everyone to stay apart from their families and friends, but I am asking everyone to please hang on a few more weeks. Even when the Governor changes the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order, the way we move and act cannot be as usual. I expect we will continue to recommend social distancing, limited physical contact, enhanced hand sanitation, teleworking, and maybe even masking in public.

Now that the weather is better, it is even more tempting to go out and get together. The past week was Easter, and with the good weather and people venturing out, this makes controlling the disease more challenging. I am hopeful we will not have a setback. We will know in the next two weeks.

The good news is that more testing is available in our community. The community testing site run by Providence hospital in Hawks Prairie is currently testing everyone who has symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, regardless of whether you are high risk, and regardless of where you work. When you are tested, we ask you remain on self-quarantine (stay at home, away from others) for a few days until you receive your test results. If you are sick, for any reason, please stay home.

The other piece of good news is the staff and patients of our long-term care facilities are doing a fantastic job! So far, we have not had any active cases of COVID-19 in our long-term care facilities in Thurston County. Well done!! In the next few weeks, more test kits will be made available to our clinics so people can get tested. We know anyone who is sick and working or residing in a congregate setting (with a lot of other people), are more likely to pass it on to others, so we will continue to prioritize testing for these populations. **Will wearing a mask protect us from COVID-19?** Masks work better to protect others. They are a barrier, primarily for droplets that come out of our own mouth when we talk or cough, or from our own nose when we sneeze. When these droplets are contained, less people are exposed. If you tend to touch your face a lot, wearing a mask sometimes reminds you not to.

Why do I need to continue social distancing? We really have no way of knowing WHO is infected. Not everyone who is infected has symptoms, and for people who are recently infected, it takes a few days to show signs of the disease. You can be infectious a few days before you start showing symptoms. That means anyone you encounter, in any neighborhood, at any shop, at any time, may be infected. Social distancing is the action we each can control, and which will help protect us.

What about herd immunity? Maybe a lot of people already had the disease and were not identified?

In Thurston County, it is unlikely we have enough cases in the community to consider that ‘herd immunity’ will protect us. So far, we have only tested symptomatic individuals and have about 3% positives out of about 3,600 tests. Estimates from other countries suggest that half of cases are not symptomatic. So even if that were true, the number of cases we have will not be widespread enough to protect us all. The only way we can be assured of herd immunity is with mass vaccination with an effective vaccine, or through the unfortunate natural process of widespread disease and death within our community. We also don’t know if people who have had COVID-19 have immunity, or how long it might last, to protect them from getting COVID-19 in the future.

So how do I continue to protect myself once restrictions are changed? You can continue to telework, if that is an option. Definitely continue social distancing and avoiding crowds. Maintain the good habit of washing your hands frequently and using hand sanitizer, as needed. To protect others, stay home when you are sick and wear a mask if you must be within 6 feet of someone or in public places.

Please continue to do your best to maintain social distancing. We will get through this—and we will get through it best if we all hold the line a while longer.

Thank you,

Diana Yu, MD, MSPH

Acting Thurston County Health Officer